

THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN NATURALIST

Vol. 26

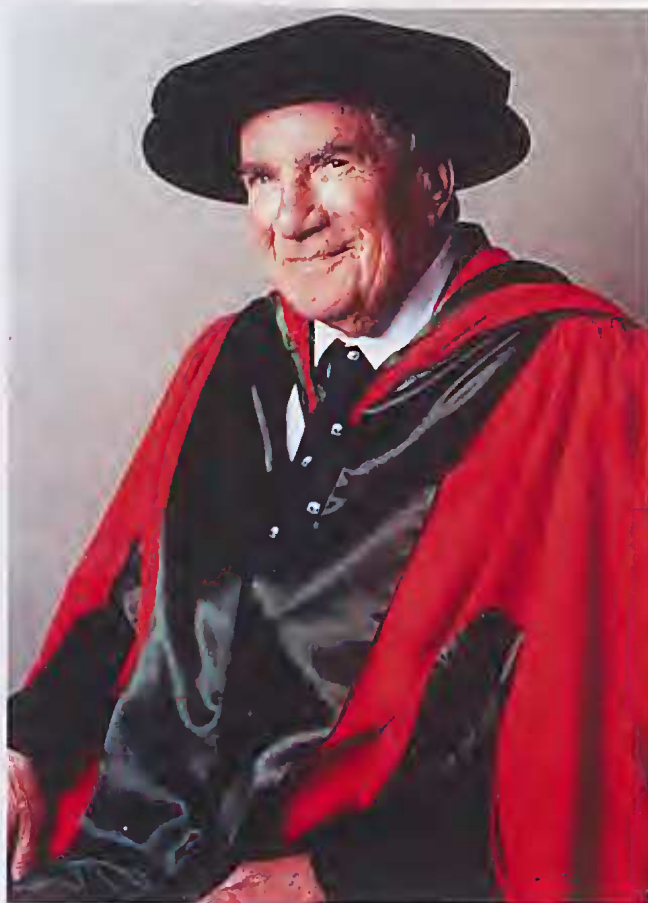
30th October 2008

MUSEUM VICTORIA
No. 3
27 JAN 2009

OBITUARY

VINCENT NOEL SERVenty

6 January 1916 – 8 September 2007



Vincent Serventy awarded the degree of DSc from Macquarie University.

Members of the Western Australian Naturalists' Club were deeply saddened at the death of Honorary Life Member Dr Vincent Serventy on 8 September 2007. A detailed obituary article with personal tributes can be seen in "Australian Wildlife" Spring 4/2007.

Some personal tributes from Club members are provided below.

The following is extracted from the introductory speech delivered by John Dell at the Serventy Memorial Lecture which honoured the contributions of the Serventy family.

"Vin Serventy joined the W.A. Naturalists' Club in the 1930's and his enthusiasm and drive resulted in a tremendous increase in Club activities. Vin was a renowned and exciting educator who drew huge crowds at various lectures and the annual Wildlife Shows in the Perth Town Hall. He served 3 terms as Vice-President and 2 terms as President before moving to the eastern states with his wife Carol who was club Secretary in 1956-57.

Vin's contributions to conservation since then have been legendary and he is regarded as one of Australia's leading conservationists. Over more than sixty years of environmental work in Australia, and internationally, Vincent Serventy has worked to realise his vision of a world whose people understand that we do not own this earth, but are trustees for its future, and that we should live in harmony within nature.



Vincent Serventy on a Naturalists' Club excursion to Garden Island in 1950. Photo: Joy Russell, now Joy Harnett.

Originally a significant figure in environmental education in Western Australia, he spread this educational work to a wider field by his books, articles, lectures, letters, telecasts, radio programmes and magazine editing.

Thousands of Australians have taken up environmental science as a career, or joined conservation groups, because of his influence and wonderful example.

His more than 70 books on wildlife, the environment and conservation have played a major role in the

development of conservation interest in Australia since the 1960s.

Vincent Serventy was one of the leading figures in many conservation battles in Australia, both large and small, for many years.

He delivered the inaugural Serventy Memorial Lecture in June 1990 with a very apt lecture titled "The Individual and the Environment". Sadly Vin passed away on 8 September 2007."

A personal tribute by Barbara York Main

" "69"– he can write, take a gander at this".

Students clustered round in the school quadrangle, poring over an article by Mr Serventy in a recent copy of Walkabout – an Australian "outback" magazine before "outback" became trendy, its issues comprising a mixture of travel, camping, geography, and



Vincent Serventy being presented with the award Ridder of the Golden Ark by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands.

wildlife and with natural history projected as an acceptable pursuit. Vin Serventy, High School science teacher (later to become head of the Nature Advisory Section in the Education Department), writer and photographer, film maker, conservationist; but foremost a naturalist, his enthusiasm inspired a generation of high school students including those whom he did not formally teach in the class room.

I recall my first week at Northam High School when on a hot February day in a stuffy class room pervaded by the end of summer smell from the Avon River, "69" was supervising a group of first years prior to their allocation to particular classes. Desperate to get some rapport with the gaggle of students, he queried "Anyone interested in BIRDS?" A few hands were tentatively raised, including mine. So began a long and rich association with Vin, as colleague and friend. With Bert (A.R. Main) and sometimes a few University students there were many camping trips, especially into the Wheatbelt and Goldfields (and later in eastern Australia). And it was soon apparent that Vin's interests extended beyond birds. I was often grateful for his deft handling of a spade when extricating trapdoor spiders — his mother might have complained about his less diligent application of this tool in the vegetable garden at Subiaco but from Payne's Find to Widgiemooltha and Queen Victoria

Spring he was quick to dump a pile of dirt adjacent to a neat pit ready for me to dissect a burrow.

Vin was a pioneer of the nature film in the early days of television in Australia and with a copious list of magazine articles and over 70 books, combined with his public speaking and role in many societies dedicated to wildlife conservation, general natural history and heritage, his influence has been widespread and lasting.

Born in 1916 in Western Australia, Vin spent his formative years on the family orchard at the foot of the "hills" where with his siblings (family child labour!) he contributed to the construction of a stone wall (later to be ignominiously bulldozed, presumably for road material). His secondary education at Perth Modern School was followed by a Science degree at the University of Western Australia and a Diploma of Education.

While fulfilling his teaching obligations Vin was all the while writing and photographing natural history subjects from insects to birds and other creatures as well as landscapes and particular habitats. (In searching for some photographs which would include Vin as a subject I am now disappointed to realise that on our many bush sojourns, Vin was always the "camera man" ordering someone else into the picture as a scale!) He spent much time travelling and camping in the field, giving authenticity to the many books



Vincent Serventy climbing in the Stirling Ranges in 1950. Photo: Joy Russell, now Joy Harnett.

he wrote as single author or a contributor. Australia, a continent, was his terrain and his writings and photographic records range from the southwest to the Kimberley, to Lake Eyre, to Tasmania, to north Queensland and the Barrier Reef. But for many, perhaps his most read and loved book is "Dryandra" the story of a Western Australian forest depicted through the natural history of a selection of animals and plants against the changing facets of the annual cycle of seasons.

Vin was an active member (including serving on committees) of many "clubs" and societies such as the Western Australian Naturalists' Club, Tree Society, Conservation Council (WA), the National Trust, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia (of which he was ultimately President of Honour) and the Australian Society of Authors. He was also a long time Fellow and several times President of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (WA) as well as having been National President. In recognition of his contribution to conservation he received many awards, namely a Dutch Knighthood, Member of the Order of Australia (AM), an Honorary Doctorate of Science, recipient of the Australian Natural History Medal.

Vin was married to Carol (Darbyshire) for over 50 years. They had three children and after moving from Western Australia via a continental northern crossing in a four wheel drive and caravan to Sydney (filming and writing en route) in 1965 they settled in a rambling house at Hunters Hill. This was Vin's base from which he made his many sorties into the bush and overseas until finally Carol and Vin dug in at Pearl Beach. But still the articles and books continued to flow. While his public writings and active participation in conservation battles are well known there remains a hidden trove – the letters. An indefatigable letter writer, to

newspapers, politicians and other public figures, advocating or lambasting some cause or action, to societies, relatives and friends; surely not a day passed without several carefully edited, or hastily typed or peremptorily scribbled notes and letters finding their way through the post.

Vin had a large circle of colleagues and personal friends. Sadly, many preceded him. But for many of us we can still see him around the camp fire, trudging through the bush and walking briskly along the sand at Pearl Beach stooping to pick up someone else's litter, forever considering the care of the landscape.

A personal tribute by Alan Notley

Having recently arrived in Perth from England I first joined the Club in 1950. Meetings were held at the W.A. Museum meeting room. Bert Main, then a student at UWA was President and Barbara York was secretary. Club excursions seemed to be organized by Lucy Serventy with Vincent giving a great deal of support. Vin was always there to lead. He was so enthusiastic with everything he did. Of course he had the support of older brother Dominic and many others but it was Vin's enthusiasm that made the Wildlife shows and all Club activities so successful. These

shows took nature study to the people of Perth and WA and took the Club into a post war revival that continued on after Vin took his knowledge and enthusiasm Australia wide.

Although in latter years he lived near Sydney he still had time for his home state.

In 1985 when what is now Mt Lesueur National Park was threatened with coal mining Vin flew to Perth to support our Club, the Wildflower Society, and others in a rally and meeting on the site. He was not well at the time but insisted on continuing to the meeting and speaking to the press. The campaign was successful. The mining company withdrawing their claims saying they were not aware of the ecological significance of the site which is now a National Park.

Vin showed great courage and determination with his efforts to protect the environment.

He was an environmental campaigner well ahead of his time. He wrote *A Continent in Danger* in 1966. He would be heartened to see that the majority are now becoming aware of these dangers. He will be sadly missed by all who knew him.

He led so many of us on a path of knowledge through the bush and we learnt so much along the way.